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Abu Nidal Suspected in Recent Attacks Despite a Lack of Conclusive Evidence

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WASHINGTON—The leading suspect in both the hijacking of a Pan Am jetliner in Pakistan last week and the attack on a synagogue in Istanbul is the shadowy Palestinian terrorist who calls himself Abu Nidal. But intelligence officials said they have no conclusive evidence linking his group to the attacks, which killed a total of 42 people.

In addition, although Libya is the group's major patron—it paid for last year's Abu Nidal hijacking of an Egyptian airliner—intelligence officials of the U.S., Israel and Western Europe said they have even less evidence that Moammar Gadhafi sponsored the Karachi hijacking.

Administration officials are studying how the U.S. could punish both the Abu Nidal group and Libya for the hijacking, but senior officials said the U.S. won't retaliate unless it gets much better evidence than it now has on who planned and ordered the hijacking. Some officials said they expect eventually to be able to identify the group responsible for the attack, but they said they are less certain they will be able to find a state sponsor behind it.

The frustrating search for the culprits underscores the great—and growing—difficulty in hunting down and attacking international terrorists, despite President Rea-

gan's vows that he won't let attacks on Americans go unpunished.

While American officials suspect the Abu Nidal group, some Israeli officials believe another Palestinian terrorist organization, called Force 17, may be responsible.

U.S. officials said Pakistani authorities are holding four young Palestinians suspected of seizing the Pan Am plane a week ago. But they said three of the alleged hijackers appear to have arrived in Pakistan only recently and to know little about the planning of their mission.

The fourth suspected hijacker, who is believed to be the group's leader, may be able to reveal more but is too badly wounded to be questioned intensively, the officials said.

The four used forged Bahraini passports and Soviet-bloc automatic weapons, U.S. officials said, but those clues haven't proved very useful, either. "What we have doesn't mean much," one official said.

As a result, U.S. officials said, it was mostly circumstantial evidence that prompted Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger to declare that the Karachi hijacking bore the Abu Nidal group's "footprints."

U.S. officials said they couldn't confirm reports that Pakistani authorities have arrested a man carrying a Libyan passport in connection with the hijacking.

But U.S. and other intelligence sources said there is considerable circumstantial evidence of activity by both Abu Nidal and Libya in Pakistan, at least since February. Pakistani authorities expelled a Libyan trade official suspected of terrorist activities earlier this year, and intelligence sources said known Libyan and Abu Nidal operatives have been spotted in Pakistan several times this year.

Even if officials find convincing proof of Abu Nidal's guilt, they concede that it will be difficult to retaliate against the group. Abu Nidal is so elusive that he's frequently rumored to have died. His group is divided into small cells that are recruited and trained in temporary camps in the Libyan desert, in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley and in Syria.

And U.S. intelligence officials said the group's office in Tripoli, the Libyan capital, is located in a crowded apartment building.

Retaliating against Libya itself would be much easier, senior U.S. officials said. But proving that Col. Gadhafi sponsored the hijacking is likely to be even harder than pinning the attack on Abu Nidal.

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